

REFRACTORY RHYMES

RALPH G. BEAMAN
Boothwyn, Pennsylvania

In his syndicated column of November 12, 1974, L. M. Boyd issued the following challenge to his readers:

Our Language Man once reported that "silver", "spirit" and "chimney" are words that do not rhyme with any other words. To that brief list, he now adds "liquid", "window" and "carpet". Any others?

Well, Mr. Language Man, if you insist upon a ready-made word from Webster's Unabridged rhyming with any of these, the task is very likely impossible. But who said that rhymesters had to be restricted to single words?

Did you ever hear the popular song
That rhymes pneumonia with phone ya?
It's cute, not too long, I find nothing wrong;
Just as I always look upon Sonya.

I've thought and I've thought and I've thought about SILVER,
And once even dreamed about CHIMNEYS;
A one-year-old ewe in dial. Eng. is a chilver,
No doubt you must know they have trim knees.

The rhyming can't really be all that at fault;
Through the WINDOW I saw him bake thin dough,
Flour and milk, pinch of salt, a spicing of malt;
He may loaf, but he never has sinned, no!

I know it's not easy to rhyme the word LIQUID,
And oftentimes much harder than CARPET;
Does the octopus try to embrace a quick squid?
Do you drink or work out with a bar set?

When rhyming is simple and meter not hard,
Then SPIRIT, you won't want to fear it;
Rhyme and meter -- be on guard -- please add meaning, the bard
Said it never was his wont to queer it.

The refractoriness of these six words was discussed nearly a century ago by C. C. Bombaugh in his long-out-of print book, Gleanings for the Curious from the Harvest Fields of Literature, reprinted by Dover Publications in 1961 as Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature.

Boyd does not mention orange, the most famous of all refractory words. The Normal and Reverse English Word List, containing all of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition, reveals the following possibilities:

A most singular word is ORANGE,
Never prefixed, unlike the SPORANGE,
 With macro-, or mega-, or zygo-, or oo-,
 Or micro-, or tetra-, or tricho-, or zoo-,
Except CANETON A L'ORANGE.

Bombaugh cites rhymes using more range and door-hinge; more recently, Willard Espy bent the rules of syllabification in The Game of Words (Grosset & Dunlap, 1971) with the couplet "The four engineers / Wear orange brassieres". He further cites a poem by Arthur Guiterman who discovered a rhyme in the surname of H. H. Gorringer, the man who brought the Obelisk to Central Park and is buried in Sparkill, N. Y. To these pioneering efforts can now be added the ballad of the girl and the orange:

She snuck in to steal a nice orange,
But couldn't get into the larder;
Could pick neither lock -- nor bolt -- nor hinge,
No way to get through the barred door.

Determined to purloin an orange,
She just had to try all the harder;
She got a grenade and a bombsight for range,
Then let go with all of her ardor.

She blew out the door -- but no orange,
For they caught and soon feathered and tarred her;
The Poet told the mob, "You foolish morons,
Lock her safely in jail and then guard her."

So thus ends my tale of the orange
And the girl -- one should really reward her;
Release her at once and then pay her for injuries suffered * * *

(Arghh!) The Poet's League barred her!

Bombaugh cites a large number of additional refractory words, including proper names such as Niagara and Timbuctoo. However, he probably never dreamed of the following rhymes for widow and widower:

Say, kiddo -- you a widow?
I'm a widower (glad to be rid o' her!).

Don't leave yet! On December 18, the indefatigable Boyd produced two more refractory words overlooked by Bombaugh:

To his list of words without rhymes, our Language Man now has added "exit" and "pregnant".

And on January 15:

May our Language man add "purple" to his list of words without rhymes?

The following tour de force may well result in permanent revocation of my poetic license:

We're told it's rough to rhyme EXIT,
Even tougher for PREGNANT;
He unfolds the list, quickly checks it,
Can't resist, not indignant;
No wiz deigns spell, curse, or hex it --
Time will tell if repugnant --
For what is contained, he now wrecks it;
And e'er reigned, Poet Regnant!

If Gelett Burgess can write about a purple cow, I can write about a purple mare:

Riding the purple
Sage, Wyatt Earp'll
Adjust the curple
Knowing a burp'll
Help her pull
Rather than hirple.

If you run across any more rhyming problems, Mr. Language Man, just let me know.

WORD GAMES IN THE ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA

In 1974, the Encyclopedia Britannica was completely recast into a one-volume Propaedia (a logical outline of all knowledge), a ten-volume Micropaedia (capsule definitions, short descriptions) and a nineteen-volume Macropaedia (extended essays). In the Macropaedia, Joseph T. Shipley, the author of several books on wordplay, has written a wide-ranging historical article entitled "Word and Letter Games", briefly describing word play based on meanings (riddles, puns, malapropisms, Irish bulls, spoonerisms) and letter arrangements (palindromes, word squares, anagrams, rebuses, crosswords, the game of Ghost. Enlivened by numerous examples, his article was favorably commented on by Anthony Quinton in the Times Literary Supplement. Mr. Shipley believes that his article is the first of its kind to appear in a general reference work; Word Ways readers are invited to make suggestions for possible changes in future printings.